The U-2 Affair: High-Flying Plane Was Built Over Opposition in Kelly Johnson's Skunk Works

Only 10 Men Knew About It—Eisenhower Had Misgivings.

By DAVID WISE and THOMAS B. ROSS

This is the fourth installment of a condensation of the book "The U-2 Affair" which tells the story behind American espionage flights over the Soviet Union.

Chapter IV

BLACK AS A HAT

THE U-2 was born in the last days of October 1954 in Room 4E964 in the Pentagon, overlooking the Potomac.

It was the office of Trevor Gardner, a 39-year-old engineering prodigy who had been persuaded by President Eisenhower to join the Government in 1953 as a technical adviser to the Air Force on research and development. He made a dramatic exit three years later when the Administration refused to provide more money for bombers and missiles.

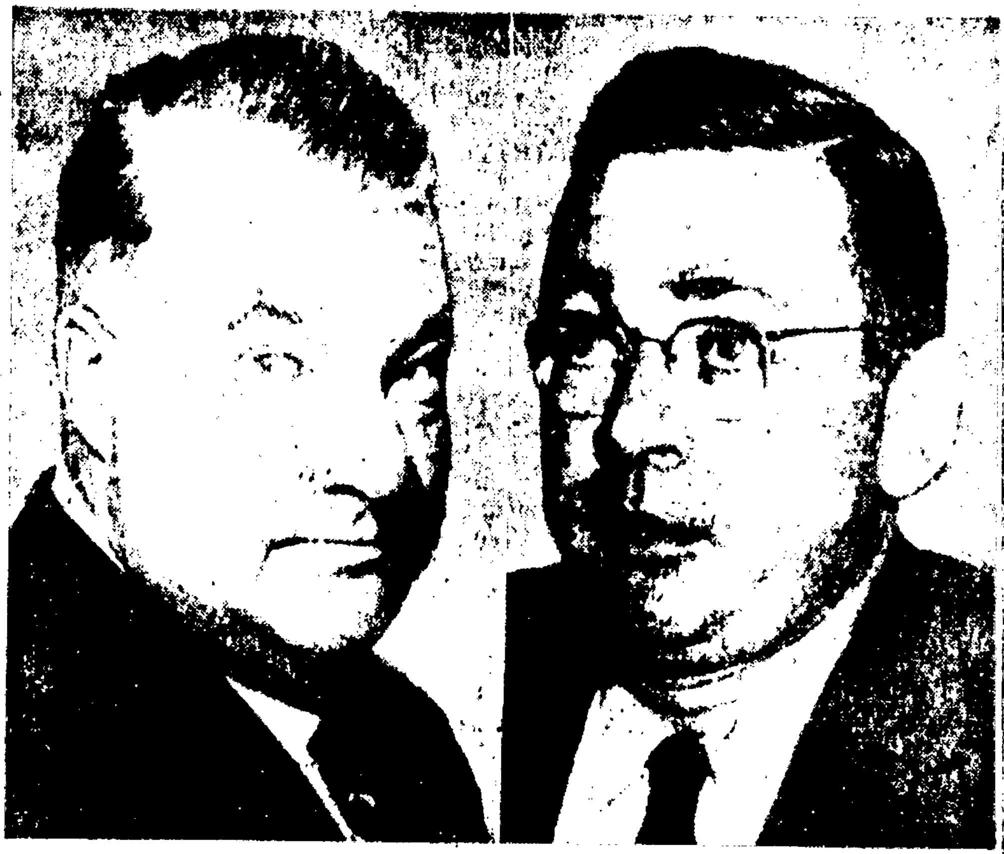
Gardner was a member of a small group which had been agonizing over the U-2 since July. The idea had been brought to the Air Force by Clarence L. (Kelly) Johnson, a Lockheed vice president and its chief designer.

IN DECEMBER 1953, Johnson had begun an investigation of the possibility of increasing the performance of his F-104 jet so as to gain maximum altitude and range for reconnaissance purposes. He decided quickly that an entirely new plane might be built to [illegible] on the Soviet Union.

On March 5, 1954, Johnson took his design to Gardner and Col. Bernard A. Schriever, who was later to become the chief of [illegible] missile [illegible] in the Air Force. They [illegible] and advised [illegible] draw up a formal [illegible].

Early [illegible] next month he submitted [illegible] plan along with [illegible] gram [illegible]

[illegible]



CLARENCE L. JOHNSON (left), a Lockheed vice president, who designed the U-2. He obtained the support of TREVOR GARDNER, a technical adviser, when he first attempted, in 1954, to interest the Air Force in development of the espionage plane.

search and Development Command.

The proposal was revived by the Science Advisory Committee, which had been established by the White House to explore new scientific techniques for the Government.

JOHNSON WAS CALLED back to Washington on Nov. 19, 1954, and questioned in great detail by Gardner and the scientists. He also discussed the project over lunch with Harold Talbott, the Secretary of the Air Force, Allen Dulles, and Richard M. Bissell, who had been brought into the CIA that year as a troubleshooter and idea man.

Bissell was intrigued by Johnson's proposal and joined forces with Gardner and the scientists in pushing it. A plane that could fly at 70,000 feet—Johnson's first goal—was a fantastic idea in 1954. The top operating altitude for aircraft at that time was [illegible]00 feet. The British had just set a record—64,000 feet on a zoom-up. But Johnson had done fantastic things before, turning out the F-80, America's first jet, in 141 days in World War II.

Gardner fully expected the Russians to develop the means to counter the U-2 in a year or so. Still he saw ample reason for taking the risk. He was convinced the Russians were making significant advances in bombers and missiles, but he was finding it difficult to persuade his boss, Charles E. Wilson, the Secretary of Defense.

EVERY TIME Gardner would plead with him for more money, Wilson would reply: "You'll never convince me the Russians are nine feet tall."

If the U-2 were to bring back revealing pictures, Gardner reasoned, they might speak a thousand words to "Engine Charlie."

His argument was convincing to Talbott. He approved the program in December 1954 and the money was provided by Wilfred J. McNeil, the Pentagon's comptroller. The initial outlay was small and Wilson went along with the order to build.

Knowledge of the operation was tightly restricted from the start. Only 10 men were admitted to the secret—three members of the Science Advisory Committee, plus Bissell, Gardner, Talbott, McNeil, Wilson, General Nathan F. Twining, Air Force chief of staff, and Gen. Donald L. Putt, deputy chief of staff for development. Their names were listed on a yellow piece of paper. It was called a control sheet and it was then the only written document on the true nature of the U-2.

THE TOP-SECRET control sheet gave Johnson the authority he needed. He returned to California and began to put the plane together in hundred-hour work weeks at his Skunk Works, a maximum security plant at Burbank, where he turned out the F-80 and F-104. All of the U-2s, originally called just "Kelly's plane," were hand-made at the Skunk Works at a cost of about $850,000 each.

Two efforts were made to conceal the U-2's role as a spy. It was throught at first that the plane could be designed so that radar could not detect it. But Johnson couldn't completely carry it off.

It was also thought that the plane might include an automatic destruction device. If the U-2 were to develop trouble, it would explode automatically, destroying the plane and killing the